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ABSTRACT

Many educators look upon schools as the exclusive site at which meaningful learning can take place. Those educators would benefit from seeing the possibilities offered by non-school environments. This paper argues that the museum is a full-fledged educational institution, and focuses on how the museum may be seen as a site for the inquiries of educational researchers. For example, the museum provides a wide-ranging laboratory because the learning conditions are different from most school situations. A museum is a setting where learning is voluntary, self-paced, and exploratory. In such a setting researchers are enabled to understand more about what people pay attention to and why, and for how long. It also is argued that museums offer fresh perspectives for researchers to explore questions concerning curriculum, pedagogy, subject matter, and milieu. What researchers discover about the educational process that takes place in museums can help them to understand and shape school-based learning. (DB)

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The Muse as Educator*

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The Muse as Educator

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Many school-based educators think and act as if schools exclusively or almost so, are capable of providing educational regeneration to make learning both responsive to society and fully satisfying for the individual. History suggests that the national reports that have called for educational reform in the 80's will probably meet the same fate as their predecessors of the last seventy five years. For the most part they are insular about schools and neglect the possibilities suggested by a richer understanding of non-school educational environments. This requires an open mind about where learning can best be accomplished and to the alternative forms of pedagogy and use of a variety of media and technology associated with learning in non-school settings. In other words, we must put aside our concerns with territoriality to see schooling and education in a fresh light.

The focus of this paper is on the museum, one of several non-school educational environments. All of us are familiar with this cultural institution, indeed what visit to a new city or place like San Francisco would be complete without supping the pleasures from a wide range of institutions from A to Z, art galleries and arberata to zoos with natural history museums, living history museums, science and technology centres in between. We also know that many museums have devoted countless resources to developing and maintaining school-based visitation programs.

Indeed, in my own city of Toronto, right from my office window I can count as many as fifty school buses parked around the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), and the same would be found for other museums such as the Art Gallery of Ontario and the Ontario Science Centre. This is duplicated in numerous jurisdictions throughout North America. In spite of this activity, within the mainstream educational establishment, such visits and programs for the most part are seen the way most field trips are viewed, interesting diversions but not an integral part of schooling. My point is that there is a taken-for-granted nature of our experience with museums, a view that stops us from seriously integrating this institution into our educational system.

Part of the reason is that among our beliefs is that museums are cultural institutions concerned with the collection and preservation of artifacts (writ broadly). This was the original purpose, serving as the private preserve of the rich. However, the museum has evolved as an educational institution over the last eighty years because of its concern with communicating to the public. The communication or educational aspect has been more pronounced as these institutions have become so reliant on public funding. Another reason why this educational mandate has been less available is because, within the museum community, those involved with education have often been dominated by curators and designers.

In this paper, I wish to lay out one view of how the museum can be seen as educational, and speculate how the eduational community as represented by those interested in AERA could start to consider the museum as a site for inquiry. In approaching the task, I have looked back

over a decade of exploring the mysteries of museums as educational institutions. This journey include inquiries by myself and/or my students into how children, teachers and museum educators experienced field trips; the use of a discovery gallery for gifted students; the study of the secondary school housed within the Ontario Science Centre; the evaluation of a Bat Cave Gallery, the most extensive simulation offered by ROM; the use of computers in an art gallery; and case studies of museums offering different types of objects, such as technology, living history artifacts, and traditional fine arts.

I recognize that this is just the tip of the educational iceberg as far as museums go. Education in such settings is more than school-based programs, i.e., field trips or even special arrangements for students in enriched programs. There are all sorts of adult and continuing education programs offered at most institutions. And let's not forget the major client: the casual visitor. The museum is no longer the private preserve of the wealthy few. Millions of individuals visit because, as Stephen Dobbs (1987) suggests, they want to satisfy their curiosity about things found nowhere else, or it has become engrained in the ritual of tourism and travel, or there is social cachet in attending "blockbuster" exhibits.

The one feature that links all of these reasons for people being in museums is that each are learners in their own way. This institution offers a microcosm of learning situations, from classroom - like lectures and demonstrations to experientially based archaeological digs to informal family outings. How are we to make sense of all this diversity of learning situations? What can we learn from studying these institutions? How should we conduct such inquiries?

The remainder of this paper will sketch some ideas on these matters.

An Educational Orientation

1. Museum as Educator

I accept the premise that museums are educational institutions. First, as institutions that augment, supplement and complement the formal educational setting. Second, as part of its mandate, which originally was to collect conserve, and preserve cultural artifacts, and now includes communication and education about its artifacts and collections.

2. The Curriculum of Museums

As educational institutions, museums can be referred to as having curricula, in the pluralist sense. The curriculum family can be well represented: there are the intended, observed, experienced and hidden aspects of curriculum. For example, the blueprint for developing a gallery or exhibit represents intentions, how a person interacts in that setting brings about the experienced curriculum.

3. The Curricular Commonplaces

Museums wrestle with such curricular questions as what knowledge is of most worth? How shall it be presented? For whom? and Under what conditions? These issues represent the commonplaces of subject matter, teacher, learner, and milieu, a minimum lexicon of terms needed for a complete characterization of curriculum (Schwab, 1970). Although the discourse of museum workers rarely includes such terminology (Soren, 1990) nonetheless their deliberations indicate a concern for these ingredients.

4. Curricular Orientations and Educational Objectives

Homogeneity of purpose is as much a stranger to the museum as it is to schools. The most familiar and traditional perspective is the "museum as sacred grove, where visitors have a reverential experience with an object. But other orientations can be found, e.g., the museum as educator" in which visitors have planned purposeful activities to engage with; and "museum as entertainment", where museums take on characteristics of Disneyland in order to amuse. Underlying any of the orientation are concrete views (consciously known or not) of the curricular commonplaces. For example, notions about the relationship between learner and subject matter differ across orientations. In some settings, there are preordinately determined objectives which some museum workers try to get across, but given that there are multiple types of learners in the museum, and that it's difficult to know what experiences they bring with them, precise objectives are problematic.

5. Voice of the Educator

While there are professional educators employed in most museums, they usually are relegated to school visitation programs. Other professionals such as curators, designers, and administrators often dominate gallery and exhibit development. While educators participate they are but one voice among several, and often the curator as subject matter specialist or the designer as creator of the technological milieu dominate the process. Whatever the conditions, it is likely that multiple perspectives influence the educational possibilities of galleries, exhibits and displays. All of this, within a context where learning is usually nonlinear, self-paced, voluntary and exploratory (Screven, 1986).

Educational Inquiry in Museums

I have suggested that museums are complex educational institutions, in some ways similar, but in others quite different from the school setting. It is this familiar, yet strange context which I believe may allow us to learn something about schools, and learning in general. As I earlier suggested, the problems with schools require more lateral thinking solutions than we seem to be generating within the school context itself. Problems of dropouts, lack of motivation for those who stay are but several symptoms of the larger picture that schools for most students are no longer interesting places to be.

What can we learn from exploring an educational context which features the potential for nonlinear, self-paced, voluntary and exploratory learning? What features of museum educational

programs offer some clues about life in schools (and in other educational settings)? For example, in the case study of the school at the Ontario Science Centre, we found that the relationship between teachers and students was characterized by an easy informality, best expressed by everyone being called by their first names. We also observed that students began to have a different image of science when they were called upon to serve as hosts on the floor of the Centre. Many of them recognized that science as authority in the form of having the right answers was problematic, that science is tentative, not always sure of its knowledge base. There are other examples that I could offer from this study, but I will sketch out just a few broad possibilities using the curricular commonplace framework.

Learning

Museums provide a wide-ranging laboratory because the learning conditions are different from most school situations. A setting where learning is voluntary, self-paced, exploratory would enable researchers to understand more about what people pay attention to, why, and for how long. Such a context can help us to understand the different ways of perceiving the world. Cognitive scientists could study how people learn and acquire knowledge under widely differing circumstances, from didactic displays to interactive computer games. What can we say about the use of advanced organizers and postorganizers on different learners? Do all learners approach an exhibit in the same way? What is the role of prior knowledge on how we react to an object? to an artifact?

The museum offers possibilities for studying learning within and across different age groups, from the developmental psychologist studying the reactions of pre-schoolers to various shapes and objects to those researchers inquiring into the intellectual functioning of the elderly. Those interested in adolescent psychology could study what features of exhibits are most likely to hold the attention of visitors of this age group. Given the diverse audience served by museums, comparisons could be made across different age groups, adding to our knowledge for both school and continuing education situations. The emphasis on studying literacy at different ages makes the museum an ideal setting for this type of inquiry.

Teaching and Pedagogy

The museum presents opportunities for studying different forms of pedagogy. There is the more traditional pedagogy associated with the docent in the art gallery, or the demonstration in a science technology centre. Usually, however, formal teaching is a small part of the museum's pedagogy. Forms of pedagogy are built into the labels, the organization of objects within an exhibit, and the technology used to present information about objects. Inquirers who are interested in how various types of media can be used and what impact they have on visitors would find a veritable feast in museums. Among media to be encountered are text in the form of labels, panels, photographs, films, overhead projectors, cassettes, computers and other interactive devices. In the educational setting, those interested in investigating different combinations of media for different conditions could look at already existing arrangements or become involved as part of design teams in constructing new exhibits and activities.

In a totally different vein, educators interested in teacher training could use the museum as a means for observing what prospective teachers and experienced teachers can do and learn in a different institutional context, especially as it might relate to particular subject-matter interests. Those interested in curriculum development and curricular deliberations could investigate how teams go about the business of developing exhibits and the like. Additionally, inquirers interested in the study of professionals might want to understand the situation in which museum educators manage to develop and maintain their professional identity in a setting where education has not traditionally been of the highest priority. Of some interest are the interactions between professionals who bring differences in training and epistemology to their work within the same setting. In particular, discipline-based curators with their interest in theoretical questions from an applied science perspective are very different from educators who are concerned with uncertain practical questions and reflexive methodology (Schwab, 1970; Schon, 1983).

Subject Matter

Museums represent varied contexts for the study of subject matter as diverse as fine arts, botany, anthropology, zoology, history, astronomy, etc. For example, researchers could investigate the views of science that are put forward through different exhibits within the same institution, or even between two places, such as a science centre and a zoological garden. Museums also represent sites of interdisciplinary offerings, in part because of the range of staff expertise, and because of the lack of constraints of following a formal curriculum. Examples

of interdisciplinary activity might be helpful for determining ways in which teachers and/or curriculum developers might plan for the school setting. For those interested in the connection between formal school and museum offerings, the study of the subject matter linkages could be invaluable. As well, the museum offers opportunities to study what conditions favour learning in different subject matters.

Milieu

Museums offer different physical and psychological spaces than do schools. Those interested in environmental psychology could conduct studies on such properties as lighting, height of ceiling, space between objects, patterns of movement, and their effects on visitors, perhaps of different ages. Inquiry on how the different senses react to different stimuli represented in various objects, exhibits, displays, activities, etc. might be beneficial for our understanding of different pedagogical conditions in the school setting. Museums represent important locations for studying visitor to visitor interactions, especially the roles of different family members and/or friends, in the learning process. Educators interested in small group learning should find conductive settings for their inquiry. Another area ripe for inquiry, is the impact of the political and cultural messages conveyed by museums through exhibits, activities, etc. Sociologists and historians could study how various institutional structures develop, change, and, perhaps reify knowledge in the form of cultural capital that some groups receive and others don't in the museum setting.

This list largely skims the surface of possible ways in which educational inquirers might consider museums as settings for their own interests. Additionally, there are inquiries which could focus on the linkages between schools and museums. For example, one area could be the delineation of the effects of field trips on school-based learning. Yet another could be the various collaborative arrangements between educators in museums and those in schools, such as the arrangements at the Ontario Science Centre Secondary School.

Conducting Educational Inquiry in Museums

The previous suggestions suggest that there are so many different ways that museums might serve as an educational research laboratory. Clearly, the variety of questions can accommodate diversity in the way that we inquire. This setting allows for the use of the classical experiment as well as con'extually-oriented naturalistic case studies, and all manner of method that falls between the two. The experimental study is epitomized by the laboratory setup of Screven where studies are conducted on the features of an object or exhibit that visitors pay attention to. The naturalistic case studies conducted at the Smithsonian by the late Robert Wolf stand as examples of how such field studies might be conducted (1986). Studies of school field trips allow for studies in both the school and museum contexts. While there are no new methods called for in looking into the museum setting, a premium should be placed upon watching and listening as part of a repertoire of visitor tracking skills. Since museum goers are not necessarily confined to any one space or object, teams of individuals may have to be employed in such observation.

There is one observation that I'd like to share with those interested in conducting such studies. Many of the professionals within the museum setting have a particular worldview about research, what Habermas would categorize as a traditional instrumental perspective which values the experimental canons of objectivity, reliability and validity. Curators especially bring the worldviews from their own disciplines to bear upon judgments of appropriate educational research. How ironic that science centres which celebrate idiosyncratic case study discoveries of scientists, and fine arts curators familiar with the aesthetics of connoisseurship and criticism, often have difficulties accepting interpretive, field-based studies. At a time when we have just begun to make breakthroughs about diverse methods in school-based research, perhaps we can enlighten museum folk about the richness of diverse research traditions.

I return to the original premise of this paper: that the museum as an educational institution offers promise for both understanding and shaping school-based learning. Are museums the panacea that some have been searching for in order to revitalize schools. Probably not, but we should come to appreciate that schools by themselves may not be the solution. In speaking of the promise of newer generations in the survival of the species, Paul Perrot has suggested:

> If this is to be, we must provide these generations with better tools for understanding: Schools of course, but also museums in all of their dimensions, where the integrity of the natural order and the creative spirit of humanity are witnessed, interpreted, related, and ultimately, preserved. (1980, p.21)

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